Education – 1921.

Discussions.

A "Close-Up" of Negro Education

Independent 5/21/21

By Talcott Williams

WHEN I want a "close-up" of negro education in the South and the nation, I go to Hampton Institute. It has set the pace for half a century, tho it has never had much over a thousand students and has now about eight hundred in the year's course, a reduction due to the war, with a steady increase pointing to twelve hundred students in two or three years. The plant is equal to this and the splendid opportunities of this school should be used to the limit. It is criminal to have any seat vacant. If you want to see it full, send your contribution to Hampton Institute, Hampton, Virginia. Already $135,000 is contributed yearly in small sums to keep Hampton going, and this sum does the work only because every boy and girl, young man and woman in the institution, works to pay board and lodging.

General S. C. Armstrong, its founder in 1868, came to his task fresh from the futile schools of the Freedmen's Bureau, which offered the elementary education of New England, after 250 years of liberty, to a race fresh from 250 years of slavery. He saw, just as the great men saw who evangelized and civilized the northern barbarians of Europe from 1000 to 1500 years ago, that the mechanic arts must go hand in hand with knowledge. Unconsciously, General Armstrong created the closest parallel of a mediæval monastery history has known. Hampton and its elder child, Tuskegee, twice the size of its mother, with their farms and their work shops, their schoolrooms and their religious atmosphere, their day from half-past five until their tired students drop asleep, too weary even to get into mischief, repeat the amazing miracles of Benedict and the Celtic monks of Ireland, of sites like Columba, Cluny and Fulda. "Prayer, work and reading," these monastic schools had, and the greatest of these was work.

The great educational asset of Hampton and Tuskegee is that every hour of the student is accounted for and subject to rule or a "*regula*," as St. Benedict would have said. Think of your desultory day while you were being educated. Did you come out of high school, academy or college with the view of the passing hours, ground into you by a tireless and tiring schedule, that sixty minutes' worth of every hour asleep or awake had to be used? Second, every student at Hampton and Tuskegee has to learn some handiwork and the women the care of all that makes a home. Third, the whole atmosphere is one of service, prayer and a far-off duty of making life count for the advance of a race.

By 1888 the proof in character and teaching power and in the large northern contributions given Hampton had made "industrial" the watchword of secondary southern negro schools. As Hampton and Tuskegee graduates have gone all over the South teaching, the leaven has spread thru all its states. Now in the fullness of time there come two Federal acts, the Smith-Lever for farm extension and demonstration teaching and the Smith-Hughes for vocational teaching, for which teachers of Hampton training are needed on a large scale, demanding as many teachers as Hampton, Tuskegee and all the industrial schools and colleges in the South can furnish.

Discussion.

Negro illiteracy is the peril alike of the negro and the nation. One-third are illiterate. The college has been needed as much as the industrial school. For forty years and more I have known personally the graduates of Howard, Fiske, and Atlanta. I know no greater achievement than the work these and other colleges have done without endowment, equipment or adequate support. I know their shortcomings, and what fools some of their graduates have been; but I know too that the nation has had no more useful scholars than the thin, but courageous, resolute and self-sacrificing line of negro graduates, about 4000 in number, from northern and southern colleges, who have given the negro his clergymen, his lawyers, his doctors, his journalists and above all his teachers. I know them, their burdens, the scorn, the perils and the trials they face. Every American should be proud to share the citizenship of this advance guard of negro knowledge in the South.

But I know also the great rural South. I knew it thirty years ago, when six to eight weeks in an open shed was all the schooling negroes had. As on a tide gauge, I have seen the level rise at Hampton. When I was first at the school thirty-six years ago, it could barely carry a handful of its students to the first year of a northern high school and most left with a trade and the grammar grades; but they had character and the Hampton spirit. Twenty-five years ago the students who came from all over the South to Hampton could be carried only to the second high school year. Now they go to the end of the high school. Taking southern conditions, a teacher or a trade-taught man or woman, farmer or mechanic, who has had the habits that come from measured hours, has lived, boy or girl, the soldier's life of cleanliness, unvarying order, discipline, obedience and punctuality, and has gained a solid high school training, taught intensively, is sent forth as exactly the man or woman to raise southern rural standards. Many high school teachers will read these lines. Could you not do wonders with the ignorant, if you had them in small classes, each boy or girl with the bearing that comes from "setting up," and an invariable daily bath, obedient, yearning to learn, sometimes weary and vainly trying to keep awake because they are earning their keep, but eager and always working?

Hampton now has four full high school years and two more after this for teachers. It has the years of agricultural work which the Morrill Act requires. Where the trade school once had in three years 1100 hours in classwork and 7000 manual practice, now in four years there are 3500 hours of class work and 4000 of hand work. Harness and wagon have gone. The automobile and internal combustion engine have come. Do you know of any other school which a boy can enter with no money, work four years and be able to make not only road but shop repairs in a garage, with a good technical basis so that if he saves $2,000 to $2,500, when he is out five or ten years, this negro boy can, by that time, have a garage and machine shop for autos and one of the small factories now multiplying in the South?

"In ten years more," I wrote of Hampton in the Philadelphia *Press*, in 1903, "this school will cover high school years. In twenty it will be technical. In thirty, I unhesitatingly predict, this vast plant will be the best secondary technical school of the South, turning out negro foremen, managers and overseers, the brains of the negro industrial South." Two-thirds of the prophecy has come true. The other third will. At this stage of southern education, for thirty years to come, a strong technical secondary institution will be better than a weak scientific technical school. For these studies the negro does well to go North.

HALF the students of Hampton come from outside its two adjoining states, Virginia and North Carolina. This makes it more national than our great universities. From primary grade across the threshold of a teachers' college work it has gone in half a century. It is a strong technical high school and is doing the work of the agricultural college already.

It is a Reserve Officers' Training Corps, and the military training General Armstrong began now begins preparation for a commission. I love to see these negro boys wearing the officer's cap. The cost of this work is high. Taking the practice school, the summer school and Hampton itself, the teaching trade and clerical force is one for each ten taught, the proportion of post-graduate work. The endowment is $3,000,000. Tuition is carried by scholarships. Half of those who apply are rejected, tho all that is asked is adequate training for the grammar grades as "preparatory" to the high school. In Hampton 37 per cent are preparatory, and in Tuskegee half. Nearly all the South has now for negroes an eight month rural public school, and all the states have six months. Texas has good high schools and all the states have city high schools. But the work is poor because the elementary work is ill-paid, and it is ill-paid because the South has little wealth to tax, and wealth is little because of ignorance, white and black—an evil circle.

Taking these conditions, Hampton and Tuskegee, with their many imitators, doing the best they can on insufficient means—for industrial education is always costly—are exactly what is needed to reduce colored illiteracy, thru rural and city primary and grammar schools. To meet these needs, both these schools are moving toward preparation for college and university, introducing French and Spanish while doing the great work needed in teaching the southern negro rural school. This is the greatest need in our national education, first met by Hampton.

The teachers, mechanics and farmers it sends out can go into ignorant neighborhoods, make over the schools, improve the family standard of living and of the house itself spread new ideas in farming, in fruit and flower raising and teach other teachers to do the same work.

DIVISION OF BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE RESEARCH